

**Pay Attention**  
*I Corinthians 10:1-11:1*

The children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. The nun made a note, and posted on the apple tray:

"Take only ONE. God is watching"

Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies.

A child had written a note, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples. "

We are in a section of Paul's letter dealing with the issue of idolatry. In particular, it was the question of whether or not a Christian could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. You kind of get the feeling that some in the Corinthian church were looking for wiggle room here. After all, they were free; they had freedom in Christ.

"God is probably watching the really bad people or those who were weak in their faith and not choosing to exercise their liberty. So, whatever we want to do, we can do. God won't notice."

Paul began this section at chapter eight and declares that the real issue isn't the food, but what effect eating it would have on the weaker brother or sister. He appeals to the law of love which must trump the law of liberty. There are times when one has to set aside one's rights for the good of others.

In chapter nine, Paul shares his personal example of setting aside his rights as an apostle to be financially supported by the church. He did that so that he might freely give the Gospel to everyone, that he might be able to win as many to Christ as possible, and that he might conduct his ministry such that he would not be disqualified along the way.

When he comes to chapter ten, he goes back into Jewish history to use their experience as an illustration applicable to the Corinthians as a warning against idolatry. Remember, that Paul is concerned about those in the church who, by violating their conscience and eating such meat, might be drawn back into the idolatry out of which they had been saved.

Paul says: **Pay Attention to the Israelites.** Turn in your Bible this morning to First Corinthians, chapter 10. Follow along as I read from chapter ten, beginning at verse one.

**I Corinthians 10:1-14**

Paul says – here was a people blessed by God and yet they experienced God’s discipline. There are five experiences that all the Israelites shared:

- 1) All experienced God’s guidance and protection of God’s presence symbolized by the cloud.
- 2) All passed through the Red Sea. They experienced God’s miraculous deliverance from the Egyptian army which was ready to annihilate them.
- 3) They were all baptized into Moses. What does that mean? Baptism carries the idea of identification. When we are baptized into Christ, we are identified with him; he is our Head, our leader. The Israelites, through this experience, were identified with Moses, and Moses as their head.
- 4) All ate the same spiritual food. This was the manna that God provided to sustain them on their journey to the Promised Land.
- 5) They all enjoyed spiritual drink. Paul says that this water was sourced in and provided by Christ.

Here’s Paul’s point: Even though they enjoyed all these blessings from God, it did not make them immune from the consequences of sin. God was displeased with them. The evidence of that is what happened in the wilderness.

We know that only two adults of those gathered at Mount Sinai would be allowed to enter the Promised Land. All others would fall in the wilderness. Even Moses, because of his disobedience and disrespect for God’s command at one point, would not realize the promise. Maybe this is behind Paul’s concern in chapter nine, verse 27, that he might be disqualified from his ministry. And he fears the same for his fellow believers in Corinth, thus this illustration from Israel’s past.

So he says that all these things that happened to Israel are for their instruction, that they might avoid the discipline and judgment of the Lord that the Israelites experienced. There is the danger in the church of complacency, of compromise, of believing that as recipients of God’s grace and his blessings, they were immune to God’s discipline.

Paul goes on to lay out five failings of the Israelites that parallel the five-fold blessings that were theirs.

- 1) **They craved evil.** Perhaps this is a reference to their craving for meat, unsatisfied with what God had provided to them. In Numbers eleven, we read about how the people complained to God about the manna. They wanted meat!

So God sent up from the sea a swarm of quail. As the people ate, God's anger burned against them and he struck them with a devastating plague. Maybe Paul's example of this was to strike a chord with those in Corinth who insisted on eating meat, even meat sacrificed to idols.

2) **They participated in idolatry.** This probably refers back to the construction of the golden calf while Moses was up on the mountain at Sinai.

3) **They indulged in sexual immorality.** It seems that whenever we see Israel fall into idolatrous practices, immorality followed. Paul describes this sequential connection between idolatry and immorality in Romans, chapter one.

God didn't just turn a blind eye to those who engaged in such practices. His judgment was swift, decisive, and devastating. Paul warns the Corinthians that they needed to beware of this. So much of the worship of various gods and goddesses in Corinth involved sexual immorality.

4) **They were testing God.** Paul refers to the story from Numbers, chapter 21. Let's turn over to that passage because it illustrates a point that is very important for the Corinthians and for us today.

### **Numbers 21:4-9**

This story of God's deliverance was one that continued to be told throughout Israel's history. In fact, Jesus referred to this in a conversation he had with Nicodemus, one of the great teachers in Israel of his time. John, chapter three, records their discussion about being born from above, spiritually.

Jesus spoke of his ascent and descent from heaven. And then, he said to Nicodemus:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

The bronze serpent was an instrument of salvation – of deliverance for the people. In like manner, Jesus, being lifted up – referring to the cross, would be the instrument of salvation for all who look upon him in faith.

But have you ever wondered what happened to that bronze serpent in the wilderness? The Israelites began to worship it. It assumed greater and greater focus of attention and significance to the people. This went on until 700 years later when King Hezekiah came to the throne and began to battle the Israelites' paganism and idolatry. Listen to this from Second Kings, chapter 18, verse 4:

[Hezekiah] removed the high places and broke down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it.

A good thing, a God-given thing, a God-ordained thing, had become an idol that was worshipped. Paul fears for the Corinthians that indiscriminate exercise of their liberty in Christ could lead them back into idolatry if they are not careful.

5) Grumbling. In Numbers, chapter 16, the story is recorded of how the people grumbled against Moses and Aaron, those whom God had raised up to be their leaders. Perhaps Paul is using this example to warn the Corinthians against grumbling against him – the one who was pointing out their failure and the dangers associated with what they were doing.

And so, he says to the Corinthians – verse 12: “Therefore let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” He warns those in the church who would be saying to Paul, “We are okay. We are strong in faith. We can eat that meat, regardless of its impact on weaker brothers and sisters. We are strong. No way do we become idolaters again.”

Paul knows the draw there would be back into idolatry. He also knows the ostracism believers would face if they were to disassociate with old ways of living and those still enslaved to idols. And so he adds verse 13 – a promise of God’s Provision. **I Corinthians 10:13.**

The temptation to return to the old was not new. But God would faithfully meet all their needs if they would trust in him. Therefore, verse 14 – “Flee from idolatry.” Paul cautions them against the suction back into idolatry.

Paul goes on in this section to tell the Corinthians: **Pay Attention to the Real Issue – I Corinthians 10:15-22.**

He reminds them of the communion table – that when they partake of the bread and the cup, they are participants with Christ. The word in the Greek text is *koinōnia*, which means “fellowship.” As we celebrated communion this morning we were fellowshiping with Jesus – in participation with him.

There is also a human, horizontal aspect as well. Paul speaks of sharing the bread. As we do that we are in fellowship with one another, demonstrating our unity together in Christ.

And so Paul says that even though idols mean nothing, it is what lies behind the idols we should be concerned about, that is – demons. So, how can we participate with the Lord and also with demons? To do so is to provoke jealousy in the Lord and to invite his discipline upon us.

The third instruction Paul gives in this chapter is **Pay Attention to the Glory of God**. Here he gives specific instructions about two situations. Look what Paul says:

### **I Corinthians 10:23-31**

Paul begins by putting limits on liberty. Liberty always involves responsibility. Don't seek your own good, but always your neighbor's good. Isn't that part of the Great Commandment? "Love God and love your neighbor."

Now, here's the liberty: When you buy meat in the market, eat it with a clear conscience. Even if it was meat sacrificed to an idol, about which you would be unaware, remember that all belongs to God. You can eat with a clear conscience.

If you go to the home of an unbeliever and he puts a steak in front of you, eat it if you like. No violation of your conscience. However, if you are told that it has been sacrificed to idols, then refrain. Here's the responsibility – both to a weaker brother or sister who might be present, or as a witness to your host that you have separated from the idolatrous lifestyle what once characterized your life.

Now, here is the overarching guiding principle: "Do all to the glory of God." So that whether you eat or you don't eat, you are motivated to honor God and bring glory to him. You do that by not giving offense to others.

Liberty and responsibility: together they bring balance and allow the believer to be in the world but not of the world.

Now let's ask the question that begs our attention: So what? "I wasn't tempted this past week to eat any meat sacrificed to idols. In fact, I didn't even see any idols around home or work." Well....

### **Video – *Idol Worship***

I've been thinking: "What about idolatry today? Does this discussion just belong back in the first century?" The very first of the commandments God gave to Moses for the people was: "You shall have no other gods before me." Throughout the Old Testament we see these gods depicted in objects of stone and wood and metal.

Let's consider the form gods and idols take today. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century Reformer, wrote:

Whatever man loves, that is his god. For he carries it in his heart; he goes about with it night and day; he sleeps and wakes with it, be it what it may – wealth or self, pleasure or renown.

A god is whatever you love above all else, or serve, or worship, or seek, or allow to control you. Luther said: “Whatever then the heart clings to, whatever thy heart relies upon, that is properly thy God.”

I think, perhaps for us living at this time and in this place, we could sum up our most common idols into three major areas:

1. Pervasive Sensualism – these are matters related to our senses. They include food, drink, entertainment, recreation, sex, etc.

2. Excessive Materialism – the pursuit of material things: possessions, cars, houses, electronics, clothes, investment portfolios, etc.

3. Obsessive Careerism – it starts with an obsession of getting my child in just the right pre-school and then school, then college. People worship their jobs, their careers.

Douglas LaBier, in his book, *Modern Madness*, writes:

Careerism has become the main work ethic in our times. At root, careerism is an attitude, a life orientation in which a person views career as the primary and most important aim of life.

Now, here’s the thing. There’s nothing wrong with food, drink, entertainment, sex, cars, houses, possessions, careers, jobs. They are all morally neutral. It is the wrong use of those things, of the wrong focus and affection put on those things that lead to idolatry.

The bronze serpent was something good for Israel but it became an object of worship – what was good, became evil. When you think about it, evil is nothing more than perverted goodness. Satan takes what is good and seeks to turn it to his bidding. This is why we must be on the watch that all these things God gives us for our good and our enjoyment, do not turn into idols and become a snare spiritually.

Paul says that we must guard against anything else becoming God in our lives. The refrain of Steve Green’s song: *God and God Alone* goes like this:

God and God alone – is fit to take the universe’s throne. Let everything that lives, reserve its truest praise, for God and God alone.

May I ask you to take an inventory of your life today? Is it God and God alone? Or have other things become substitutes for God, crowding him out, putting him on hold? It might even be that they are good things, worthwhile things.

What about your affections, your thoughts, your ambitions, your goals in life, your position, your security, your identity, your possessions? Here is a set of questions that you and I might ask ourselves:

- Do I value God more than I value myself?
- Do I value the things of God more than I value the things of earth?
- Do I value the approval of God more than the approval of others?
- Do I value the priorities of God more than my own priorities?
- Do I value the importance of God more than my own importance?
- Do I value God's glory more than my own glory?

Those are hard questions. They probe into the depths of my heart and soul, and expose my value system and my belief system. It goes far beyond what I confess with my lips and goes to the core of my being.

God gives us all things to enjoy. We have great liberty and freedom in Christ. But with liberty comes responsibility – first to God our Creator and Savior, then to others.